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AUTHOR Kitao, Kenji; Kitao, S. Kathleen.
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ABSTRACT

After tests are administered, they are scored and the scores are given back to the students. If the real purpose of the test is to improve student learning, simply returning the scores is not sufficient. The first step in evaluating test results is to be sure that the test has tested the intended concepts and content. Calculating the mean and the standard deviation shows whether the test has been too easy or too difficult. After checking all the questions for appropriate difficulty, the teacher should decide whether to discard any items and rescore the test. Tests should then be returned to students with the correct answers and some comments that will help improve student learning. Teachers should also use the test results to improve instruction and to improve the test itself, building up a test bank of items that have been used with previous students. Checking the results carefully gives good feedback to students, helps evaluate instructional quality, and helps in the preparation of better future tests. (SLD)

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ED 398 255

Evaluating the Test Results

Kenji Kitao Doshisha University Kyoto, Japan
S. Kathleen Kitao Doshisha Women's College Kyoto, Japan

After tests are administered, they are scored, and the scores are given back to the students. In many cases, that is the end of the process. In some cases, the scores are not even given back, and they are only used for the final class grades. Is this a good use of the testing process? Is the only purpose of tests to get scores or to assign final grades? If so, why is so much time and energy spent on making good tests and administering them?

We need to go back to the beginning. Why do we give tests? If we do it to improve instruction and to give feedback to students about their progress, we need to use test results effectively for those purposes.

Evaluating Test Results

As soon as we obtain test results, we need to evaluate them. The most important question is, of course, whether the test has tested what we wanted.

The first thing to do is to calculate the mean and, if possible, the standard deviation. If it is not possible to calculate the standard deviation, one alternative is to make a histogram to show the dispersion of scores. Was the test too difficult or too easy? Are the scores dispersed well? Is the range large enough? These are among the first things you can check.

You should also check to see whether students have understood the questions. Are there any questions which are too difficult or too easy? If there are, you need to consider why they are too easy or too difficult.

As a general rule, an item is too easy or too difficult is that the score of question is more than 20 percentage points different from the mean score of the test--but this is only a general guideline. A question that is too easy by this guideline might still be included if, for example, it covers a major concept from the course or if you want to keep some easy questions as an encouragement to lower level students.

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If a question is too difficult, you need to try to figure out why. It is possible that for some reason the students did not understand the question correctly. You should reread the question again carefully. Is it somehow tricky or misleading? Is it possible that the testees did not understand what they were expected to do. It is possible to ask colleagues whether the questions seems ambiguous, or even to discuss with students how they interpreted the question. The type of answers students gave may also give an indication of whether they misunderstood the question or what they were expected to do. Do their answers indicate that they were responding to a different question from what you thought you wrote? If it does appear that there was some misunderstanding, you need to consider whether the question should be thrown out or whether there is a way the question can be written in a way that is clearer.

If the mean score is between 65 and 85%, and the scores are well distributed, the overall results are good. If each item is about the same difficulty level and has meaningful wrong answers, they are good. If some questions are too difficult or too easy due to problems in the way the question was written, you need to revise them.

Giving Feedback to Students

After checking all the questions, you need to decide which questions, if any, to throw out and then rescore the test, as well as revising for the future test.

Tests should be returned to students with correct answers and some comments. Those comments include what each question or section is testing, how to study to cover them, as well as what the distribution of scores was for the class, so that students will know how well they did on the test in comparison with other students. You can also indicate above which level scores are particularly good and below which level scores indicate problems. You should encourage students to come to talk about their problems if they got poor grades so that they will learn from their mistakes and not repeat the same mistakes.

It is important to remember that the test is not the final evaluation itself, but part of the process of instruction, and tests should help students learn. This is probably the most important role of tests in instruction.

Evaluating Instruction

Teachers should also use test results to improve instruction. First of all, you should check the overall scores. If the scores are too low, for example less than 50%, the instruction may not have been effective. You should check to see whether students have learned the important points covered in the class. (If more than 80% of the students got an item correct, that item was well covered in instruction.) If students appear to have missed the important points, these points should be reviewed or at least mentioned when the test scores are returned.

In some cases, items on which students do poorly are about vague, abstract ideas. If that appears to be a problem, you need to think about how to teach these points more concretely. Perhaps some of the points have been presented only orally and should be presented in writing.

Improving Tests

You can also use the results of a test to improve that test, using such information as difficulty level, item analyses, problems, etc. That way, you can build up a test bank of tests and test items that have been used with previous students and improved. Writing good test items takes time and energy, and it is a good idea to make the best use of the items you write, improving them and reusing them. Fortunately, word processors make this process easier today, and it is not difficult to keep tests, revise them, and pull them up when you need them.

Any test items that are too easy or too difficult may have to be revised. If an item is too easy, many teachers may be tempted to try to replace it with tricky questions. However, that is not a good idea. Tests should not trick students but should remind them of important concepts covered in the class and see how well they have mastered those concepts. Tricky questions may discriminate, for example, between students who read or listen carefully and those who don't, but that is not the purpose of the tests.

If students get very low grades on items related to one concept, and the question seems to be too difficult though it is otherwise a good one, you should consider making it easier and keeping both versions, the easier one for lower level students and the more difficult one for advanced students.

In some cases, students make mistakes not because they have not mastered the concept but because they have misunderstood the question or

how they are expected to respond. In that case, the item is not really measuring students' language proficiency. If a question appears to be misleading students, you need to rewrite the question more clearly and concretely, so that all the students can understand it.

Summary

The results of tests are not only for assigning the grades to students, but also evaluating the tests themselves. If the questions are too easy or too difficult, you should check whether they are good questions or not. If they are not, we need to decide to take them away for grading or not. Even we decide to include them, we need to revise them for the future tests. Checking the test results carefully gives good feedback to students, to evaluate instruction well, and to give better tests in the future. It is important to revise questions when we analyze the results since we still remember what we taught and what we tried to test well.